

# INDIAN "FAKIRS"

BY

J. H. HUNT

A paper read before the Osler Club on May 11th, 1934

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1934

FROM DR JOHN HUNT.

TEL. SLOANE 1811.

54, SLOANE STREET,

LONDON, S.W. 1.

28th November, 1951.

Dear Carstairs.

For a long time I have been meaning to write and thank you for entertaining me so well when I came to speak to the Oxford University Medical Society, and to thank you for your letter and for letting me <sup>have</sup> that cutting.

I enclose a reprint of my paper, which I promised to send you, and I hope that we may meet again one day before long.

If at any time you think there is anything that I can do for you in London please let me know.

With best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

*P.S. Will you please give the other copy to Dawson.*

*John Hunt*

## OFFER TO PERFORM ROPE TRICK

NEW DELHI, Sunday.

Swami Seewanand, 39, a Yogi exponent, plans to perform the Indian rope trick publicly in the National Stadium here. He is willing to be photographed doing it.

He said that it takes him two days to train a boy to do the trick. The rope must be a hundred feet long and two and a half inches in diameter. He is prepared to operate with a rope of these dimensions provided by the audience.

It took him 18 months to learn the trick from a nude seer who lives, Seewanand said, in a cave 10,000 feet up in the Himalayas. The seer, said to be 250 years old, bathes in milk "to keep him young."—Exchange.

# INDIAN "FAKIRS"\*

By J. H. HUNT, M.R.C.P., M.B., B.Ch., M.A.(Oxon.)

**S**TUDY of religious fanatics in any part of the world is sure to reveal the unpleasant as well as the unusual. The fakirs of India are no exception; but as most of you present to-night are medical men I have been persuaded to talk about these strange people, and I ask forgiveness now for anything that may seem to you somewhat crude in the story that I have to tell.

When on holiday in India a few years ago, I saw with my father, and we were able to photograph, a demonstration given by perhaps the most extraordinary group of fakirs in the world to-day—a performance full of interesting details from a medical point of view, and one that had seldom been witnessed by Europeans. It was interest in these men that stimulated me to investigate more fully the history and behaviour of religious fanatics in general; it is with the rites of those in India alone that we are now concerned.

All true fakirs are Mohammedan, but the wandering Hindu ascetics in India are often miscalled "fakirs" too. As these Hindus are almost the only "fakirs" one hears about in England, I propose to describe them first, giving a short account of their appearance and performances, and attempt to put before you some suggestions as to how they are able to endure the pain of the self-tortures to which they subject themselves; later I shall discuss in detail, and show some photographs of, the true Mohammedan fakirs with whom we have had more personal acquaintance.

All these fanatics may be included under the general title of "Religious Ascetics". It would take too long to describe here fully any of the theories or practices of asceticism proper, but one may mention that its chief characteristic is bodily abstinence and self-mortification, by means of which the devotee hopes to propitiate the Unseen Powers, enter into communication with them, and ensure his own salvation. Asceticism has played an important part at one time or another in every religion, Christianity included; and although social development has, in very great measure, stamped it out in civilized communities to-day, its influence is still powerful amongst primitive peoples, especially those in Oriental countries.

India above all other places is remarkable for the number of ascetics it contains. Many factors have been suggested to account for this, of which the following are perhaps the most important. Religion, of the gloomy type, is always found to flourish best where conditions of life are most unfavourable for the majority; and as the history of India is filled with accounts of national disasters—invasions, despotisms, plagues, and famines—it is not surprising that some of their religious ideas are morbid in the extreme. The climate, the vegetarian diet of the people, and the great popularity of the drugs, opium and Indian hemp, have helped to produce a patient, inaggressive, despondent habit of mind, combined with physical indolence and apathy. The most characteristic features of the psychology of the Indian people are imaginativeness, emotionalism, mysticism and religious fervour, and it is in the ascetics that these characteristics are most strongly developed.

The history of these ascetics goes back further than that of any one religion in India; each religion as it has sprung up has tried to stamp them out, but this has always been unsuccessful, and their practices have become incorporated in all. Mohamet disapproved strongly of self-mortification and other ascetic performances, but even to-day Mohammedanism is not free from them; similarly, although the first Hindu priests or Brahmans tried to crush asceticism, it is now the duty of every Brahman when he reaches a certain age to leave home, wife and children, to become a wandering beggar without possessions, living entirely on the mercy of others, spending his time in religious contemplation and in chastening himself with austerities.

Hindu ascetics are divided into two classes, which are not altogether distinct. The first and more important corresponds to the Benedictine monks of Christianity; they live under a leader in well-endowed monasteries; their work is to feed and educate the poor, and amongst this class are to be found some of the noblest characters in the whole of India. The second class, the one with which we are here concerned, is very different; they sometimes live in monasteries for short periods during the rainy season, but at other times they wander from place to place, doing no work, living entirely on alms

\* A paper read before the Osler Club on May 11th, 1934.



and food given them in the villages. Claiming to be entirely disinterested in the things of this world, they spend their time in prayer, austerities and contemplation. Some few are still dangerous, as they think that the killing of an unbeliever is an infallible introduction to the glories of paradise. It is quite impossible to enumerate all the austerities to which these people



FIG. 1.—A SĀDHU AND HIS HERMITAGE.  
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subject themselves ; with many of them we shall be more concerned later on ; they vary from slight physical discomforts such as abstention from certain foods and drinks (like those we ourselves give up during Lent), to burial alive for weeks at a time, unbelievable self-tortures and actual suicide. Between these two extremes lie those such as fasting, vows of silence

observed throughout life or during pilgrimage, walking through fires, hanging upside down, self-inflation of pain by lying on beds of nails, scourging, branding, or mutilating themselves with knives and other instruments.

It is difficult to estimate exactly how much good or harm these wandering ascetics have done in India. They were certainly at one time an important means of communication ; they do a great deal of good by showing people that there are other things more important than mere worldly possessions ; there is always a sense of brotherhood amongst them as they recognize no " caste " amongst themselves, so that this in itself must set a good example to the ordinary people whose petty caste jealousies so often lead to trouble. They are completely idle as far as manual work is concerned, and as the last census in India showed that they number nearly 3,000,000, they must be a troublesome burden to the community, even though individually they want very little, and never stay in one place for more than a short time. A true ascetic is always revered by the people if he performs his austerities properly, and he is seldom refused food, although this is perhaps mainly due to the fearful dread the people have of his curses.

The typical Hindu wandering ascetics or Sādhus (Fig. 1) are seen on every highway in India ; they carry a begging bowl, made of brass, of a hollow cocoanut, or even of a skull, a water-pot and a staff. They generally carry also a rosary made of beads, berries, seeds, snake-bones, or even human teeth, the object of which is to enable them to repeat the name of their god, or to recite their prayers a definite number of times each day without any chance of making a mistake. The great majority of them carry fire-tongs—the iron of which is supposed to protect them against evil spirits—and they nearly always possess a large pestle and mortar, with which to grind the leaves of the Indian hemp, which they smoke in their pipes or add to intoxicating drinks or sweetmeats—" Bhang ", " Charas ", " Ganja ", etc. The " Hashish " of Turkey and Egypt is made from this same plant, Indian hemp or *Cannabis indica*, and contains the same active principles as the Indian preparations, but the Turkish word " Hashish " is not used in India. The robes of these Sādhus, if they wear them, are salmon-coloured, but they generally go about nearly or quite naked, with their bodies rubbed over with ashes to keep off insects. Their foreheads are marked with a " Tikala ", a sign or symbol made with coloured earths ; their hair is either long and matted, or formed into a rough coil at the top of their heads, or entirely shaved off. They sleep on the ground, and once or twice a day go round to collect food and alms ; but they are only allowed to approach a house after the proper



mealtime of the family has passed. When they die, their bodies are buried, not burnt, as they believe that their death is only a prolonged trance in which they are in communion with the Divinity, and from which they can revive at pleasure to the consciousness of worldly things.

The chief ascetic practice of the Sādhus is known as " Tapas ". This is entirely penitential, and includes a series of methods of self-torture which would be very hard to believe, were it not for the repeated stories of eye-witnesses and the photographs that have been taken of the proceedings. The principle underlying this practice of self-torture is that through it everything can be attained. As the Hindu religious book *Manu* (xi, 239) puts it :

" Whatever is hard to be traversed, whatever is hard to be attained, whatever is hard to be reached, whatever is hard to be performed, all may be accomplished by austerities ; for austerity possesses a power which it is difficult to surpass. . . . Whatever sin men commit by thoughts, word, or deed, that they speedily burn away by penance if they keep penance as their only riches."

Power gained by means of austerities is supposed to be so great that even some of the gods themselves have to suffer thousands of years of self-torture in order not to be outdone by mere mortals !

Only a few examples of the methods used by these Sādhus for mortifying the flesh can be mentioned. Some are comparatively simple, such as prolonged fasting, immersion up to the neck in water for days at a time, living in iron cages, hanging upside down or being weighted with huge chains (Fig. 2). Those who have handled iron chains will realize that this man is carrying a heavy weight. Campbell Oman, from whose book, 'Mystics, Ascetics and Saints of India', these illustrations are taken, says that the chains weighed 500 lb. The photograph was taken in Lahore, where the man was collecting money to pay the expenses of the final ceremony at which his burden was to be removed. He was so weak that only with the greatest difficulty could he be persuaded to stand up even for the few seconds needed for the photograph.

More repulsive are the performances in which heavy weights are hung from the body by iron hooks, and the somewhat similar practice of swinging a devotee round in the air, fixed to the end of a revolving beam by an iron hook embedded in the muscles of his back.

Long and toilsome journeys are often undertaken, involving great hardships from heat and cold, and danger from wild beasts ; journeys such as that up to the source of the Ganges from which no one has yet returned alive.

Perhaps one of the most favourite and well known of these austerities is for a devotee to lie full length on a bed of iron spikes, from which he is supposed never to

rise. A Brahman ascetic of Benares is said to have lain naked on one of these couches for over thirty-five years. This practice is an imitation of the sufferings of Bhīma (described in a religious book), whose body, during a battle, was pierced by so many arrows that falling it did not touch the ground, and he lay thus supported for forty-eight days and forty-eight nights before his death, during which time—as the book puts it—" he discoursed on high topics before the assembled armies ".



FIG. 2.—WEIGHTED WITH HEAVY CHAINS.  
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These people sometimes adopt hideous and extraordinary postures (Fig. 3), their legs and arms being, in the end, fixed permanently in the most unnatural positions. Of these the most terrible is perhaps the one in which both arms are held erect by bamboo rods until they atrophy and shrink, after which they cannot be lowered again into their ordinary position. It is easy to realize that like this a man is quite helpless and depends for everything upon the kindness of others. A modification of this last-mentioned practice is for the fists to be clenched tight until the nails, which continue to grow, pass between the metacarpals, and eventually



appear through the skin on the back of the hand. In this same class may be placed those devotees who for many hours hang head downwards, suspended from a branch of a tree or a suitable framework (Fig. 4).

Many unnatural methods of progression are used by these people. There are those who perform pilgrimages of hundreds of miles by throwing themselves full length on the ground, crawling till their heels touch the spot where their foreheads last rested, then prostrating themselves again, and so on in this leech-like fashion till they reach their destination. One man with his hands tied behind his back is described as having travelled for thousands of miles by the slow and clumsy method of turning head-over-heels all the way !

and thick metal skewers through various parts of the body are quite common practices amongst certain Hindus ; but as I propose later to show you photographs of these performances carried out by Mohammedan fakirs, I need not discuss them further here.

Fire enters into quite a number of Sādhū austerities ; in a favourite one, in the very hottest weather, when the air temperature may reach 120° F., the devotee sits throughout the day between four fires, each of which is near enough to scorch him. In another performance, a man puts a piece of red-hot charcoal into his mouth, chews this up, blowing out sparks while he does so, and finally swallows it. At first sight this seems perfectly impossible, but I believe it can be explained in one of



FIG. 3.—HINDU ASCETICS.

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It is not only in India that this sort of thing can happen. In America just before the Presidential Election six years ago, Mr. Bill Williams, of Harlington, Texas, swore that if Al Smith wasn't made President he would push a peanut along the ground as far as he could with his nose. Al Smith failed him, and the peanut was pushed for eleven miles ; his nose became so sore that the last bit had to be done with a piece of wire attached !

Burial alive, although rarer than some of the other austerities I have mentioned, has been known to be a regular practice of some of these religious Hindu ascetics ; the period of burial varies from a few days to five or six weeks, and although many fatal cases are on record, there have been quite a number in which the man has been found alive on exhumation.

Self-laceration with knives, and the passing of needles

the ways I shall mention later in connection with the performance known as "*Fire-walking*". This practice of "*Fire-walking*" is not only carried out by many ascetics and other religious communities in India, but it still exists in many other places scattered throughout the world ; amongst others it occurs in Bulgaria, New Zealand, Japan, Fiji, Tahiti, Trinidad, Mauritius and Honolulu, but in all these places the principle of the ceremony is the same—the people concerned walking barefoot over a bed of red-hot stones or charcoal, sometimes over thirty yards long, without apparently suffering any harm whatever. It is impossible here to give a detailed account of these ceremonies, but as I have been fortunate enough to have seen the preparations made for one of them, and my father has been present at two or three, I am particularly interested, and one or two facts may be mentioned before discussing



the possible explanations. In the first place, there can be no doubt that these fires are generally pretty hot; bystanders are often forced by the intense heat to stand quite a considerable distance away; in one case a thermometer was suspended above the stones, over which a crowd of people walked barefoot a few minutes afterwards, but it had soon to be removed as the solder of the metal case in which it was mounted began to melt; and in some of these ceremonies meats and vegetables are cooked on the fire or stones after the walking ceremony is over. Not everyone who walks through these fires escapes being burnt, as there are many recorded cases of devotees suffering from severe burns; and as an example of an extreme case occurring in Japan a few years ago, a boy died from burns received when he slipped and fell while walking across.

In attempting to give a rational explanation of these fire-walking performances there are a great many factors that have to be taken into account, and although in many cases two or three of these have been shown definitely not to be involved, in no single case, as far as I can see, have they all been eliminated. There is always the possibility that a good deal may be accounted for by the thickness and toughness of the sole of the average native's foot; like the hands of a British navvy who lights his pipe with a piece of red-hot charcoal picked out of a brazier. That this is not the whole explanation is clear from the fact that many Europeans, and even children with tender feet, have gone through these ceremonies unscathed. Another explanation, at any rate as far as the ceremony with wood fires is concerned, is that a layer of ashes rapidly forms, which insulates the really hot part from the bare feet of those passing over it.

In many cases of fire-walking the so-called "spheroidal condition" is suggested as an explanation. Details of this are found in text-books of physics; but the principle is that if a hand or foot is moistened with water and soaped it may be brought with impunity into contact with red-hot metal, or dipped into molten lead, the surface of the skin being protected by an insulating layer of vapour. Substances are known which, when applied locally, cause profuse sweating so that here also when a hot body is touched a layer of water vapour protects the skin underneath; and in one or two cases the sap of plants was known to have been rubbed on the feet before the fire-walking ceremony began. On the other hand, there are also cases in which it is known definitely that no chemical at all was applied; in one such case a doctor visiting the Fiji Islands assured himself that this was so, both immediately before and after a native went through the ceremony, by a very careful examination which even included tasting the man's feet! Last of

all, hypnotism of the bystanders has been suggested as an explanation, but I am sure this plays no part, as numerous photographs of these performances have been taken at one time and another.

Except for this fire-walking I have as yet made no attempt to explain how the Hindu ascetics are able to endure their numerous mortifications, so I shall now run through some of the factors which seem to have a bearing on this subject. I am sure that most of their performances, if not all, are open to quite simple explanations. Many of the so-called ascetics are merely rogues, with no religious feelings whatever, and only

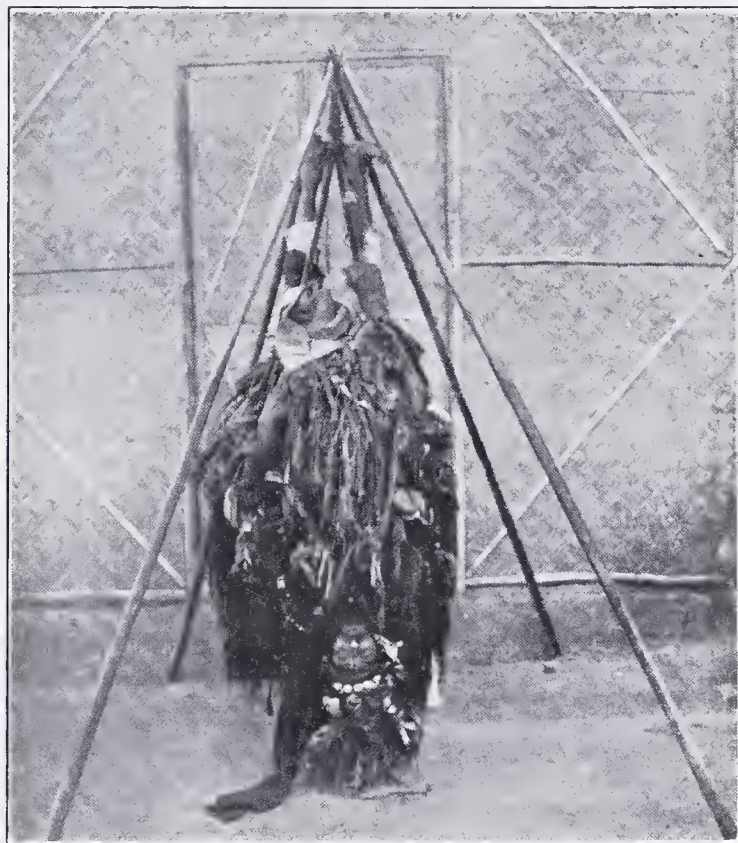


FIG. 4.—SUSPENDED UPSIDE-DOWN.

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out to attain money; so in many cases there is no doubt that simple conjuring and trickery supply the whole explanation. The famous "Mango Trick" is an example of this sleight of hand. In front of many people a mango-stone is planted in a flower-pot; in a few moments it is sprouting, and a little later is found to be growing by degrees into a small mango tree perhaps eighteen inches high. The conjurer is an expert at diverting the crowd's attention while swaying from side to side he substitutes twig for twig, pulling them out from underneath his *dhotie*.

In quite another category comes the still more famous "Rope Trick". The story is usually told of an impressive old man who throws a rope into the air above his

head, this rope stays fixed and vertical, and up it swarms a small boy. The details vary in each description; some are more fascinating than others; the degree of wonder depending on the imagination of the story-teller and the credulity of his hearers. The first reference to the trick in India comes from Delhi early in the seventeenth century. This time a chain was thrown, and up it climbed a dog, a panther and a tiger. On the English music hall stage in its more simple, but no less popular form, it is easy to explain as there is always a convenient beam in the roof on which someone sits to catch the rope; but to do it out of doors is a very different problem. Many people have personal friends who state that they have seen it done in the open many years ago, but no one can be found to produce any real evidence of having seen it with his own eyes. When King Edward VII visited India as Prince of Wales, great efforts were made without success to find someone to perform this " Rope Trick " for him to see. Lord Lonsdale once offered £10,000, and Mr. Maskelyne £5,000 a year, to anyone who could do it in London; and more recent rewards offered by the " Magic Circle " still remain unclaimed.

However, leaving out all these cases of trickery and fairy tales, there are certainly many men who really do what they claim to do: they really do lie naked on beds of nails, hang upside down, eat live coals, etc., etc., and it is very difficult to imagine in many cases how they can do it. Some of the things they do would kill an ordinary European; but it must be remembered that they have endured fearful hardships all their lives; many are born under the most dreadful conditions; all the weak ones—by far the majority—die before they reach maturity, with the result that those that survive must necessarily be less susceptible to hardships and pain than are the inhabitants of more civilized countries.

A characteristic of these people is their perseverance, which is illustrated well by the man who turns head-over-heels for thousands of miles. Many of them are entirely selfish, they have only one thing to think about, their own salvation—and they are willing to do anything to make sure of getting it. It is rivalry amongst themselves which makes them devise with diabolical cunning their various methods of self-torture.

From the physiological and pathological points of view it is well known that repeated injury of any kind gives rise to a reaction on the part of the body for its own protection; the skin of one's hands is always toughest where it gets the most irritation, and there can be little doubt that this, combined with the fact that scars are generally anæsthetic, greatly helps our friends who scourge themselves, lie on beds of nails,

etc. The most difficult part of all these performances must be when they first begin, and the beginning one very seldom sees; for all we know, it may be a very slow tedious process, slight irritants first being applied, followed by stronger ones, until the man's back is covered with a layer of skin as thick and tough as crêpe rubber on a shoe. When a traveller sees a man like this lying on a bed of spikes, he has every reason to be amazed, but if he knew all the previous preparations he might find nothing surprising in it at all. The large number of points in the bed of nails would seem at first to make this trick all the more remarkable; this is not really so, as it must be more difficult and unpleasant to lie on ten spikes far apart than on ten thousand closely packed together.

Of the men who adopt unnatural postures an explanation is, perhaps, more difficult to find. Some of them are probably double-jointed, or were born extraordinary shapes, and have no real difficulty in adopting their strange attitudes; others, by constant practice starting when quite young, succeed in stretching their tendons and even in altering the shape of their bones; whilst others, although this last type is very rare, may in infancy have been purposely mutilated, so that their terrible appearance might excite horror and pity wherever they go to the financial advantage of those who exhibit them. The men who fix their arms above their heads until they wither may really feel little pain at all. If the blood supply is gradually cut off, the muscles atrophy and the joints become fixed, until in the end the whole limb shrivels up to look like the dead branch of a tree.

The group of Hindu ascetics known as Yogis adopt strange bodily attitudes, not for any penitential reasons, but to divert their attention from worldly things. For this purpose the postures are combined with many well-known methods of self-hypnotism, such as counting the breaths, holding the breath for long periods, or concentrating the gaze for hours on a fixed point, such as the tip of the nose or the navel. In one important method, known as " Kechari ", the tongue is extended artificially, and its tip curled round and rested at the back of the throat, while the eyes are turned upwards and inwards. This turning up of the eyes is, I believe, a well-known way of inducing hypnosis. By these means (known collectively as the " Yoga system ") some Yogis, but only a very few, are able to send themselves off into a trance known as the " Yogi sleep ", in which they appear as if dead; their breathing and pulse are so weak as to be imperceptible; it is almost or quite impossible to waken them, their basal metabolism falls very low, and their whole condition resembles closely that of hibernating animals. Those ascetics





FIG. 5.—THE ANNUAL CEREMONY AT NIGHT.

Note the leader on the left with his Arab head-dress. The instruments and incense vessel on the mat in front of him. The crowd, partly obscured by smoke. The standing fakir with one instrument through his tongue and another in his right orbit.

(Copyright.)



FIG. 6.—THE ANNUAL CEREMONY AT NIGHT.

A fakir with an instrument through his tongue, and two more through his cheeks supported by a friend.

(Copyright.)



who are genuinely " buried alive " must send themselves off into a trance like this ; and while in this condition it seems quite easy to believe that they may sometimes survive for long periods, perhaps six weeks, without suffering any material damage.

\* \* \*

Leaving the Hindu ascetics we come now to the

with instruments, not only without feeling pain, but seemingly with real enjoyment.

One often hears about these " howling dervishes " but few men have seen them, and a good description of what they do is hard to find. Lord Curzon, in his book, ' Tales of Travel ' (Doran & Co.), gives perhaps the best account under the title of " The Drums of



(Copyright.) FIG. 7.—READY TO START, THEIR INSTRUMENTS SPREAD OUT IN FRONT OF THEM.

true fakirs of India, who are Mohammedans. In Persia the word " fakir " means a poor man, and is synonymous with " dervish ". There are many dervish orders in Persia, North Africa and Arabia, but the one with which we are here concerned was founded in the twelfth century, and its members are known as Rifáyites, *Rufaees* or " howling dervishes ". The rites of these men are weird : with the aid of music, dancing and other stimulants they can work themselves up into such a state of wild religious ecstasy that they cut themselves about, eat live coals or broken glass, handle red-hot iron and mutilate themselves

Kairwan " ; and so closely are these men related to the Rafæe fakirs of India about whom I shall speak in a few minutes—even the names are really the same—that I am tempted to read you some passages from Curzon's description of one of their orgies, a performance he witnessed one night in a dimly-lit mosque in Kairwan in North Africa, a hundred miles south of Tunis. Amongst rows of marble columns around the dome about a hundred persons were squatting, and in the centre sat twelve musicians with their earthen drums and tambours. The lighting was dim, as the lamps hung from the roof were merely lighted wicks floating in oil



in cups of coloured glass. The music was melancholy—a plaintive quavering wail of Arab voices, now falling to a moan, now ending in a shriek—and in the background all the time the ceaseless droning of the drums. The dance began slowly, about forty human figures rocking backwards and forwards in grim and ungraceful unison. The head priest looked on quietly, but the dancers became wilder and wilder, working themselves up into such a state of ecstasy that they eventually lost control of themselves entirely, behaving like beasts rather than human beings.

"The rapidity and vehemence of their gesticulations were now appalling; their heads swung backwards and forwards till their foreheads almost touched their breasts, and their scalps smote against their backs. Sweat poured from their faces; they panted for breath; and the exclamations burst from their mouths in a thick and stertorous murmur.

"The worshippers seemed to be gifted with an almost super-human strength and energy. As they flung themselves to and fro, at one moment their upturned faces gleamed with a sickly polish under the flickering lamps, at the next their turbaned heads all but brushed the floor. Their eyes started from the sockets; the muscles on their necks and the veins on their foreheads stood out like knotted cords. One old man fell out of the ranks breathless, spent, and foaming. His place was taken by another, and the tumultuous orgy went on.

"Presently, as the ecstasy approached its height and the fully initiated became *melboos*, or possessed, they broke from the stereotyped litany into demoniacal grinning and ferocious and bestial cries. These writhing and contorted objects were no longer rational human beings, but savage animals, caged brutes howling madly in the delirium of hunger or of pain. They growled like bears, they barked like jackals, they roared like lions, they laughed like hyenas; and ever and anon from the seething rank rose a diabolical shriek, like the scream of a dying horse, or the yell of a tortured fiend. And steadily the while in the background resounded the implacable reverberation of the drums.

"The climax was now reached; the requisite pitch of cataleptic inebriation had been obtained, and the rites of Aissa were about to begin. From the crowd at the door a wild figure broke forth, tore off his upper clothing till he was naked to the waist, and, throwing away his fez, bared a head close-shaven save for one long and dishevelled lock that, springing from the scalp, fell over his forehead like some grisly and funereal plume. A long knife, somewhat resembling a cutlass, was handed to him by the sheikh, who had risen to his feet and who directed the phenomena that ensued. Waving it wildly above his head and protruding the forepart of his figure, the fanatic brought it down blow after blow against his bared stomach, and drew it savagely to and fro against the unprotected skin. There showed the marks of a long and livid weal, but no blood spurted from the gash. In the intervals between the strokes he ran swiftly from one side to the other of the open space, taking long stealthy strides like a panther about to spring, and seemingly so powerless over his own movements that he knocked blindly up against those who stood in his way, nearly upsetting them with the violence of the collision.

"The prowess or the piety of this ardent devotee proved extraordinarily contagious. First one and then another of his brethren caught the afflatus and followed his example. In a few moments every part of the mosque was the scene of some novel and horrible rite of self-mutilation, performed by a fresh aspirant to the favour of Allah.

"Several long iron spits or prongs were produced and distributed; these formidable implements were about two and a half feet in length, and sharply pointed, as they terminated at the handle in a circular wooden knob about the size of a large orange. There was great competition for these instruments of torture, which were used as follows. Poising one in the air, an Aissaoui would suddenly force the point into the flesh of his own shoulder in front just below the shoulder blade. Thus transfixed, and holding the weapon aloft, he strode swiftly up and down. Suddenly, at a signal, he fell on his knees, still forcing the point into his body, and keeping the

wooden head uppermost. Then there started up another disciple armed with a big wooden mallet, and he, after a few preliminary taps, rising high on tiptoe with uplifted weapon would, with an ear-splitting yell, bring it down with all his force upon the wooden knob, driving the point home through the shoulder of his comrade. Blow succeeded blow, the victim wincing beneath the stroke, but uttering no sound, and fixing his eyes with a look of ineffable delight upon his torturer, till the point was driven right through the shoulder and projected at the back. Then the patient marched backwards and forwards with the air and the gait of a conquering hero. At one moment there were four of these semi-naked maniacs within a yard of my feet, transfixed and trembling, but beatified and triumphant. And amid the cries and the swelter, there never ceased for one second the sullen and menacing vociferation of the drums.

"Another man seized an iron skewer, and, placing the point within his open jaws, forced it steadily through his cheek until it protruded a couple of inches on the outside. He barked savagely like a dog, and foamed at the lips.



FIG. 8.—"DISINFECTING" ONE OF HIS INSTRUMENTS BY LICKING IT.

The boy behind is bending forward praying. The two old men are also muttering prayers; the expressions on their faces have been thought by some to suggest that hypnotism plays a part.

(Copyright.)

"Others, afflicted with exquisite spasms of hunger, knelt down before the chief, whimpering like children for food, and turning upon him imploring glances from their glazed and bloodshot eyes.

"For those whose ravenous appetites he was content to humour the most singular repast was prepared. A plate was brought in, covered with huge jagged pieces of broken glass, as thick as a shattered soda-water bottle. With greedy chuckles and gurglings of delight one of the hungry ones dashed at it, crammed a handful into his mouth, and crunched it up as though it were some exquisite dainty, a fellow-disciple calmly stroking the exterior of his throat, with intent, I suppose, to lubricate the descent of the unwonted morsels.

"Several acolytes came in, carrying a big stem of the prickly pear, whose leaves are as thick as a one-inch plank, and are armed with huge projecting thorns. This was ambrosia to the starving saints; they rushed at it with passionate emulation, tearing at the solid slabs with their teeth, and gnawing and munching the coarse fibres, regardless of the thorns which pierced their tongues and cheeks as they swallowed them down.



"The most singular feature of all, and the one that almost defies belief, though it is none the less true, was this—that in no case did one drop of blood emerge from sear, or gash, or wound. This fact I observed most carefully, the *mokaddem* standing at my side, and each patient in turn coming to him when his self-imposed torture had been accomplished and the cataleptic frenzy had spent its force. It was the chief who cunningly withdrew the blade from cheek or shoulder or body, rubbing over the spot what appeared to me to be the saliva of his own mouth; then he whispered an absolution in the

as hysteria and epilepsy may play perhaps some part; but even without them it is not really so very hard to understand how these men may, for awhile, lose control of their senses, overcome by the emotional and neuromuscular influences of the dancing, the weird music, and the terrible antics of the other performers.

However, as we know nothing of the habits or previous preparation of these men that Lord Curzon saw, it would be unprofitable even to attempt an explanation of their performance. With the Mohammedan fakirs in India whom I shall now describe to you the case is very different. Their habits have been studied closely, we have been able to take many photographs of them, and they have even given us the instruments they use.

These people, a small community in Hyderabad City in the Deccan, call themselves Raface fakirs, and they claim to be direct descendants of the Rufaees or howling dervishes of Arabia. Their founder, Syed Ahmed Kabeer Raface Kazmi, was born in Mecca over 800 years ago; he lived to be a saint of great renown, and died in Arabia in the year 1160. His religious rites centred round the practice of "Zurbath", or "self infliction of wounds", a practice which was at first carried out solely by members of his family, the secrets being handed down from generation to generation. In later years, however, disciples too were allowed the privilege of joining in the ceremonies. His fourteenth direct male descendant, Syed Shah Abdul Kareem Raface, migrated from Arabia to Southern India nearly 300 years ago. It was he who established this sect of Raface fakirs in Hyderabad, and after living to be over a hundred years old he was buried in what is now the Begum Bazaar, and around his tomb an important ceremony takes place at night once a year. In his time Golconda, eight miles away, was still the flourishing capital of this part of India, and where Hyderabad city now stands was open jungle.

The priests even now tell us that around

their graveyard, in its early days, "tigers roamed and bears stole our fruit"; while to-day this same graveyard, with its innumerable tombs, lies in the midst of one of the most densely populated districts in all India.

This community of Raface fakirs in Hyderabad is composed of about three hundred men, women and children. Their leader, Haji Shums-ud-din Raface,



(Copyright.)

FIG. 9.—THROUGH TONGUE.

ear of the disciple and kissed him on the forehead, whereupon the patient, but a moment before writhing in maniacal transports, retired tranquilly and took his seat upon the floor. He seemed none the worse for his recent paroxysm, and the wound was marked only by a livid blotch or a hectic flush."

Many factors may account for the demoniacal possession of the performers in an orgy like this. Drugs such as Indian hemp and pathological conditions such



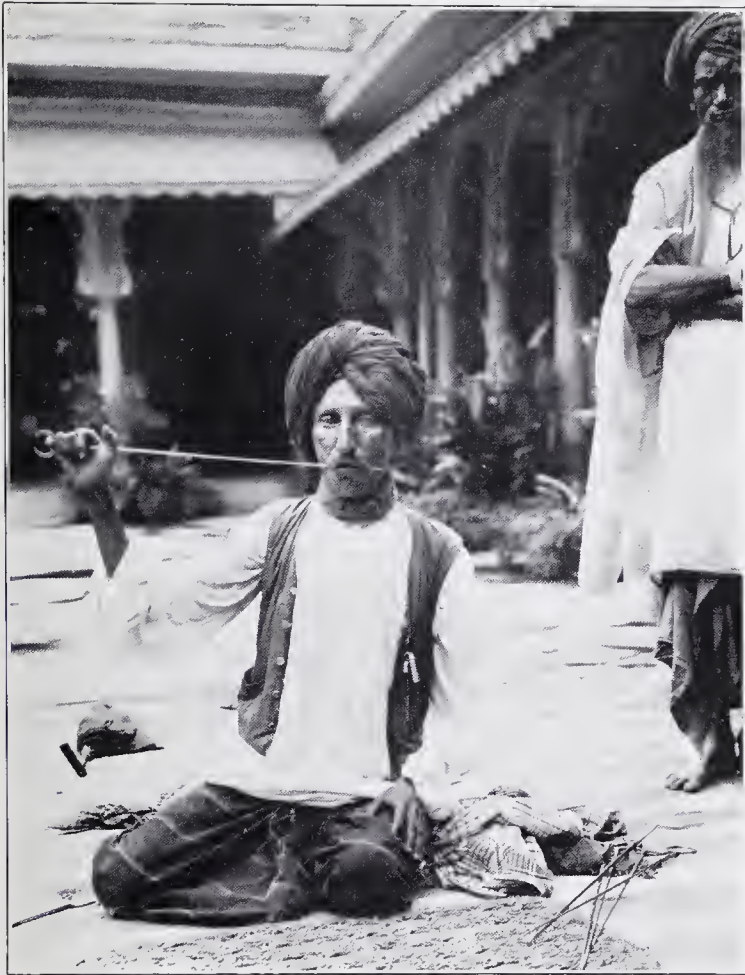


FIG. 10.—THROUGH BOTH CHEEKS. NO BLEEDING.  
(Copyright.)

direct descendant of their founder, has in his possession their sacred books—scrolls of Arab paper, jealously guarded, which explain in detail how the "Zurbath" or "self infliction of wounds" should be done, along with genealogical trees of characters common both to the Koran and to the Old Testament.

Their ceremonies of "self mutilation" are to-day of three distinct types: a solemn religious celebration in memory of their founder, held once a year at night in the graveyard; smaller rituals at other times throughout the year in the palaces of Mohammedans of high rank; and thirdly, individual demonstrations in the bazaars for the base purpose of collecting money. Their annual nocturnal ceremony ("Urus") around the tombstones and the smaller rituals by day in the palaces have been witnessed by very few Europeans, and it is these that will be described in this paper. In other parts of the world travellers have seen at times, in fairs and bazaars, the more simple of these practices; but individual, unsanctified performances are always irregular and incomplete, the more serious members of their community frowning on this prostitution of their ancient rites.

I can find no reference to this group in Hyderabad in

any of the literature. This is not altogether surprising when it is realized how difficult a city Hyderabad is to know. Being in a Native State and not directly under British control, no European was allowed, until recently, to pass through its gates without a special permit, stating the exact nature of his business and the length of time he wished to remain inside. My father, for long one of the few European doctors within reach of this city, possessed a free pass, but even he did not hear of the existence of these Rafae fakirs until he had been there for many years. In this human backwater the tide of modern civilization is hardly felt; changes flow by, while in the stagnant depths of the city itself original practices continue undisturbed, and manners and customs that have long since died out in other parts of the world may still be studied.

One morning in September, 1925, when I was on holiday in India, my father and I took photographs of the Rafae fakirs for the first time, and some of these I was able to repeat one afternoon a few weeks later, when I saw them again alone. Twelve of the twenty-two pictures of these men in this paper were taken on these two occasions, and they have not before been published. Since then my father has watched these fakirs many times by day and four times by night at their annual ceremony; with my brother Alan he has added many most excellent photographs to the series, and he has also taken a complete cinematograph record of their performance.



(Copyright.)

FIG. 11.—SKILLED ASSISTANCE.



## THE ANNUAL CEREMONY.

Every year, to celebrate the anniversary of the death of their founder, these Rafae fakirs pass three solemn days in fasting and in prayer; the fasting is strict and the prayers are long, as the whole Koran has to be read through. After dark on the last night a weird ceremony takes place, a ceremony which resembles closely in its sensational atmosphere and grisly detail that seen by Lord Curzon at Kairwan in North Africa. It is held amongst the tombs in the private graveyard of the

Behind these queer musicians sit some of the priests, mumbling and muttering quotations from the Koran.

A general buzz of excitement announces the arrival of the Leader, Haji Shums-ud-din Rafae; a remarkable-looking man, Arab in appearance and quite unlike the local Deccanis in the closely packed audience around him. In the two photographs (Figs. 5 and 6)—the only pictures, as far as we know, of this nocturnal ceremony, and here published for the first time—he is seen sitting on the left in his Arab head-dress, the green of which is a sign to all that he has but recently returned from a



(Copyright.)

FIG. 12.—"SKEWERS" THROUGH EACH CHEEK FROM INSIDE THE MOUTH.

sect in Begum Bazaar, in the North of Hyderabad City. It is revered by all as a most solemn religious occasion.

Many of the tombstones are brilliantly lit, and many are decorated with flowers and cloth; all around are incense vessels pouring forth their pungent fumes. The honoured grave is larger, brighter, and more ornate than the rest; and around it, leaving a small space in the centre, crowd the audience of perhaps three thousand men. Between the tombs is holy ground, so that all who enter must first take off their shoes. Near the centre are the musicians with their drums or tom-toms, from whose incessant deafening noise there is no escape.

pilgrimage to Mecca, and is now entitled to be addressed as *Haji*. On the mat before him is laid out the singular collection of instruments soon to be put to such gruesome use.

The drums cease for a moment, and in absolute quietness—strange for such an assembly in the East—he opens the ceremony with a prayer for the peace of the departed soul of their founder in Arabia, a prayer devoutly followed by all Mohammedans present. His next duty is to light the incense vessel seen in the foreground of Fig. 5. The incense it contains he brought from Arabia, and from it arise clouds of smoke.

The monotonous drumming of the tom-toms begins





FIG. 13.—PRESSING INSTRUMENT THROUGH SKIN OF ABDOMEN.  
(Copyright.)

again as the first fakir steps forward to the mat and bends down to pick up one of the long pointed instruments lying there. Holding it up with arms outstretched, he presents it to the priest, who passes it through the incense smoke and blesses it, thus imparting success to the undertaking and safety to his person.

The tom-toms stop once more, the murmur of the crowd dies down, and for a moment everything is quiet, as this strange man takes the instrument in his right hand and with uncanny deliberation drives it through the middle of his tongue. Not yet content, with hardly a pause, he snatches two others from a friend and runs both these through his cheeks; and pierced like this, urged on by the renewed beating of the tom-toms, and cries of approval from his friends, he struts about, this way and that, turning round and round for all to see, justly proud of his terrible appearance, showing no evidence whatever of pain, and bleeding not at all. In Fig. 6 we see him holding the instrument through his tongue, with two others through his cheeks supported by a man behind him. After a time, with the help of his friends, the instruments are removed, and once again he is blessed by the priest, while the smoke from the incense plays on his wounds.

His place on the mat is taken immediately by one of his brethren. They follow one another in quick succession, each doing something to show his immunity from bodily pain: young men, like the one just described, pierced several times at once; boys, from want of practice, doing one or two tricks imperfectly; or the pathetic figures of feeble old men trying hard to do

the things that they must have found easy in their younger days. As well as piercing their tongues and cheeks, some transfix their abdominal muscles; others drive instruments firmly into the tops of their skulls; while still others prefer to transfix their necks, either from side to side or from front to back, not just under the skin but right through the deeper structures, each performance more alarming than the last.

The most dramatic of all their demonstrations has yet to be described. A fakir, perhaps already pierced in many places, gouges out his eyeball with a pointed instrument inserted into the corner of the orbit, levering the eye so far forward that it remains dislocated in front of the lids after the instrument has been withdrawn. With his eye protruded in this hideous manner (it can just be seen in Fig. 5) he dances about in front of the audience for several minutes, before pressing it back into place with the palm of his hand.

The ceremony is concluded with another prayer for the peace of the soul of their founder, the whole audience joining in the solemn *Ameen*. When the crowd has dispersed the performers break their fast with an enormous meal.

There are two points about this annual ceremony of the Rafee fakirs that impress onlookers most forcibly: the intense religious fervour shown by everyone present, and the hypnotic influence of the monotonous drumming of the tom-toms. The first of these points was strikingly illustrated by a missionary with forty years'



FIG. 14.—THROUGH THE ABDOMINAL WALL.

Scars of old attempts are clearly seen. Not a drop of blood.  
(Copyright.)



experience of religious rites in India, who, at the end of this ceremony, insisted that never before had he seen such evidence of genuine and pious zeal in so large a crowd. The second point, the profound influence of the drums, was brought out well by a hard-bitten and far-travelled British cavalry officer, who, towards the end of the performance, with the incessant throbbing of the tom-toms in his ears and the tense atmosphere all around him, remarked that with but little further instigation he would leap into the arena and transfix himself—surely a clear example of the uncanny influence that oriental music and an emotional atmosphere like this may have on the minds of onlookers, even the



FIG. 15.—THROUGH THE SKIN OF THE ABDOMINAL WALL.  
(Copyright.)

least impressionable, an influence stressed so very well by Curzon in his inimitable style in that description of the resounding and reverberating drums of Kairwan.

#### THE RITUAL IN THE PALACES.

On the September morning in 1925 when I was first introduced to these strange men of Hyderabad, it was by the invitation of Nawab Salar Jung, in whose palace, in one of its forty-eight courtyards, the demonstrations took place.

In bright sunlight four Rafae fakirs sat on a coloured rug among the palms, with their instruments laid out on the ground in front of them (Fig. 7). These weapons, the same as those used at the nocturnal ceremony, were

long metal skewers about a quarter of an inch in thickness, and varying from one and a half to nearly three feet in length. One end tapered to a point, the other was adorned with the crescent of Islam, while the surface, though polished, was slightly rough.

With his fellows muttering prayers behind him, one of the fakirs, Zil Fakhr Shah, knelt forward, picked up a skewer, licked it—by way of sterilization!—(Fig. 8), wiped it dry on his shirt, and, just as at the annual ceremony, ran it slowly and deliberately through the middle of his protruded tongue (Fig. 9). The expressions on the faces of the old men on either side in Fig. 8 are worth noting.

After a moment or two of demonstration this weapon was withdrawn and he passed another through his cheeks (Fig. 10). I shall not describe in detail here how these things were done, as the photographs show this clearly—well enough, we hope, to convince most people that conjuring and trickery play no part. On some occasions separate skewers were passed through each cheek, a colleague perhaps lending a helping hand (Figs. 11 and 12).

After withdrawing these instruments in turn, the same fakir, with his body bent forward and the crescentic end of another long skewer pressed against the ground, pushed the point obliquely through a fold of the skin of his abdomen (Fig. 13). The site chosen was puckered with many scars (Fig. 14), and the point protruded about six inches away (Fig. 15). There is no reason to suppose that the peritoneum was pierced.

At the end of this first half of the performance, the absence of bleeding and the apparent freedom from pain were the most intriguing problems left in our minds.

The next demonstration was simply a trick, the only part of the whole performance in which fraud was introduced; a trick described here merely to illustrate how monstrous are the exaggerations that may sometimes arise when people tell at home of experiences in the East, which are repeated by their friends with imagination unrestrained.

A sword is held about 2 ft. from the ground, one man grasping the handle and another the point wrapped up in a cloth. An old fakir lies back with his neck against this sword, and rolls along it from side to side, giving onlookers the impression that the whole weight of his body is resting against its razor edge, which is cutting into his flesh (Fig. 16). From this performance has arisen the myth that there are men in the East who can chop off their heads and stick them on again; when, in reality, all that happens is that the sharp edge is concealed by a fold of skin, while pressure of the body is taken on the flat of the instrument which can be seen in the photograph to be bending under its weight.



A few drops of blood and some superficial scratches are all that can afterwards be found.

Another example of this exaggeration is a fable that has arisen from the " mango trick " in which by simple conjuring a mango-stone, planted in some earth, apparently sprouts under the very eyes of onlookers into a little twig, perhaps 10 in. high. Travellers are not unknown who state that in this time the mango tree has

#### THE NECK.

The most extraordinary of all the demonstrations was now to take place, a feat these men have carried out many times before and since, and one that appears more dangerous and alarming each time it is observed. The chief fakir, Zil Fakhr Shah, who but a few minutes before had passed skewers through his tongue, cheeks



(Copyright.)

FIG. 16.—ROLLING ALONG A SHARP SWORD. The dark streak down his back is a cord, not blood.

grown to a great height, with a trunk 3 ft. in diameter, and with branches laden with ripe mangoes ready to be plucked !

One further myth, prevalent amongst stories from the East, originates from the performance (described by Curzon at Kairwan) of a fanatic, in a state of wild religious ecstasy, slashing with a sword across his abdominal wall. This has been elaborated until the tale is told of men who can disembowel themselves, who walk up and down the streets with their entrails hanging round their necks supported on a plate !

and abdominal wall, came forward with the longest of his instruments and told us he was going to pass it from side to side right through the middle of his neck. Scars of old attempts could be clearly seen scattered up and down just behind the sterno-mastoids, closer together on the right side than on the left.

After licking the instrument to lubricate and clean it, he knelt down and wiped it dry on his shirt ; then with his right hand pressing the crescentic end on the ground, and with his left taking a firm hold of his throat, he pressed the right side of his neck steadily against the



point, rising a little off his knees. The tissues were tough and the tapering point none too sharp, so that great pressure was needed to force it through to the other side. In Fig. 17 the veins standing out on his forehead, the expression on his face, and the curve of the instrument bent by his thumb, all testify to the amount of force required. After hard pushing and wriggling of his head the point soon emerged through the skin of his neck on the other side. When it was protruding about 2 in. he knelt up thus transfixcd, the instrument piercing his neck from one sterno-mastoid to the other, running behind his carotid sheaths, and between his œsophagus and vertebral column. In



FIG. 17.—FORCING AN INSTRUMENT THROUGH HIS NECK.  
(Copyright.)

Figs. 18 and 19, as he holds the instrument with the right hand, his expression can be seen to be one of anxiety and discomfort rather than that of acute pain. No bleeding can be seen.

In many cases the force required to press the skewer through the neck is more than the fakir himself can manage, and a friend has to lend a helping hand by pressing on his head and shoulder. At the annual nocturnal ceremony the neck is sometimes transfixcd from front to back—an unusual direction seldom attempted, as it is a much more difficult and hazardous proceeding. On one occasion, when the point had been inserted just to the left of the thyroid cartilage, very great difficulty was encountered by the fakir in pressing it backwards, even with the assistance of two stalwart

friends. Then to the amazement of medical witnesses the point emerged through the shaggy hair at the back of his scalp, just above and to the right of the external occipital protuberance. To withdraw this instrument a struggle even greater than before took place, the help of several men being needed; and when at last it was removed, it was found to have been bent to an angle of about  $45^{\circ}$ , presumably from striking up against a transverse process of one of the cervical vertebræ in its journey through. Two days later this fakir was perfectly well, very proud of his terrible ordeal, and firmly believing that through it he was nearer heaven.

To return to our demonstration in the courtyard of the palace. Zil Fakhr Shah, not yet content even with his neck transfixcd, beckoned to a friend to hold this instrument in position, while he himself hammered another into the top of his skull (Fig. 21). His hammer was a stone. The implement was short and light, but the point penetrated the bone far enough to remain fixed, without support, even when he bent his head (Fig. 22). There is no reason to suppose that the meninges were touched. After a few minutes the smaller instrument was removed from his skull with a jerk, and a friend withdrew the longer one from his neck with a slow and powerful pull, the fakir himself pushing so hard in the other direction that when at last the point came out he staggered and all but fell. For a moment or two he gripped his throat, and on removing his hands not a drop of blood was to be seen. Many of these details are better appreciated by a study of my father's cinematograph record than when actually watching the men themselves.

After this performance the fakir made us a present of the two instruments he had just used.

#### THE EYE.

Although transfixion of his neck was perhaps the most dramatic from a medical point of view, the next demonstration with the eye was by far the most amazing to watch. The instrument used for this was quite different from any we had seen before—an iron rod about 9 in. long and  $\frac{3}{4}$  in. thick. One end tapered to a point; the other was surmounted by a metal knob, the size of a large orange, from which dangled about a dozen short chains (Fig. 23). One of the younger fakirs came forward, and poising this strange instrument above his head with arm outstretched, he rotated it rapidly between his fingers and thumb, so that the chains spun out at right angles to the shaft, jingling and jangling as they twirled round and round. Suddenly his body bent forward so that his head nearly touched his knees, and while in this position he pushed the point of the instrument into the





(Copyright.)

FIG. 18.—HIS NECK PIERCED.



FIG. 19.—HIS NECK PIERCED (another occasion).  
(Copyright.)



FIG. 20.—HIS NECK PIERCED (still another occasion). Note by  
how little the external jugular vein escapes.  
(Copyright.)



outer corner of his right orbit. Slowly then he raised his head, and we saw his right eyeball dislocated forward out of its socket, far enough for the lids to close partially behind it (Fig. 24). The instrument was removed (Fig. 26), and out like this his eyeball stayed, teed-up like a

after this performance, and every time his visual acuity was found to be  $\frac{6}{6}$ , his visual fields were full, and the fundi appeared normal.

I have already mentioned that these fakirs are starving when they perform. This particular demonstration was no exception; after it they seemed to be ravenously hungry, and they had an enormous meal before returning to their homes.

\* . \* \*

There are four most interesting questions that arise from these ceremonies of the Rafee fakirs. How much pain do they feel? Why do they not bleed? Why do their wounds not suppurate? Does hypnotism play any part? Two further points will be discussed later; they concern the passage of skewers through the neck, and the dislocation of the eyeball.

About the question of *pain* we know very little. That these fakirs at times feel considerable discomfort is almost certain. In their nocturnal ceremony novices may take part, and the sufferings of these young men are obvious, so much so that they are sometimes unable to complete their demonstrations. The older hands, however, usually show no evidence whatever of pain in any performance, possibly due to the fact that scar tissue is anæsthetic.

It is difficult to estimate how great a part drugs play in this type of ceremony. In many parts of the world it is known that drugs are habitually used to produce a state of ecstasy or possession: incense may be inhaled, intoxicating liquors drunk, and opium, laurel leaves or the leaves from the Indian hemp plant smoked, all for this same purpose. The effects of Indian hemp vary in different individuals. Amongst some classes of "fakirs" it is often used for its property of inducing a pleasant, dreamy, imaginative state of mind, accompanied by feelings of comfort and self-

satisfaction, a complete loss of sense of time and space, and sometimes an impression of dual personality; but its effect of dismissing entirely all sense of fear, caution and pain is the one with which we are most concerned here. A case occurring quite recently in India illustrates this last effect well. A railway workshop employee came into my father's hospital with one of his hands



FIG. 21.—HIS FRIENDS SUPPORT THE INSTRUMENT THROUGH HIS NECK WHILE HE HAMMERS ANOTHER INTO THE TOP OF HIS HEAD.  
(Copyright.)

golf ball on his cheek. Showing not the slightest evidence of pain, and rolling his protruded eye about, he walked around so that all might see before pressing it back into place with the palm of his hand. His vision in this eye seemed to be good; indeed, on other occasions his eyes were tested carefully by my father and other medical men both before and immediately



torn to ribbons, but apparently quite happy about it all, and obviously feeling no pain whatsoever. He had taken a large dose of Indian hemp ; and his story was that for a wager he had told some companions he would put his hand between two revolving cogwheels, that they had defied him to do so, and he had proved them wrong. His hand had to be amputated, but he refused any type of anæsthetic, and during the operation wanted all the time to help by holding the dressings, etc. For thirty-six hours he remained quite cheery,



FIG. 22.—THROUGH HIS NECK AND ALSO INTO HIS SKULL.  
(Copyright.)

and entertained his ward by singing and dancing, but on the third and fourth days he became terribly depressed as the effect of the drug wore off.

At the ritual of the Rafee fakirs in the Moham-medan palaces this question of drugs has been gone into most carefully, as Indian hemp would explain a great deal ; but, apart from the fact that the men themselves swear they take nothing—their sacred books forbid it—their appearance and general behaviour are not suggestive of any known drug, and it is now the general belief of all who have studied their habits closely that they use no drugs whatsoever.

More important must be the effect of religious enthusiasm and excitement, especially at the annual ceremony in its grim surroundings—the tombs by night—with the huge crowd, the incense, the prayers, the terrible appearance of the other performers and the incessant throbbing of the tom-toms in the air, all diverting the fakir's attention from his own pain and focussing it on the amazing



FIG. 23.—TO BE PUSHED INTO HIS ORBIT.  
(Copyright.)

demonstration in which he himself is playing but one small part. In the heat of a battle it is well known how often wounds pass unnoticed at the time they are inflicted. An extreme example of this occurred during a cavalry charge, I believe in the Crimean War, when the leading officer, bearing down on the enemy with sword aloft, was seen suddenly to turn in his saddle and yell to the man behind him, " Dammit I've dropped my sword " ; in reality a cannon-ball striking his shoulder had carried away his whole right arm !

Before leaving this question of pain, the influence of hysteria must be mentioned. It is well known that



hysterical patients, as the result of suggestion, are liable to develop sensory loss of a peculiar distribution—the shape of a sock, stocking or glove, the whole of one limb, all down one side, from the waist downwards, or of the head and neck. At some of the demonstrations of these fakirs conditions are eminently suitable for the development of such hysterical manifestations, and it is difficult to say exactly how great or how small a part this plays in producing their apparent immunity from pain.



(Copyright.)

FIG. 24.—EYEBALL DISLOCATED FORWARD.

The second point of interest, the *absence of bleeding*, is claimed to be a characteristic of fakir performances all over the world, and is a wonder of which they proudly boast. You will remember that Curzon mentions it in his description of the rites of Aissa at Kairwan :

"The most singular feature of all, and the one that almost defies belief, though it is none the less true, was this—that in no case did one drop of blood emerge from scar, or gash, or wound. This fact I observed most carefully . . ."

With our Rafeec fakirs of Hyderabad, however, the usual absence of bleeding does not seem now so difficult to understand as it did when we first saw the ceremony. With the skewer through the tongue the explanation is simple ; the midline through which it passes is comparatively avascular and the tongue is pulled out far,

well seen in the photographs—a manipulation often used by surgeons for controlling hæmorrhage from the lingual artery. The wounds made by the skewer in other parts of the body—through the cheeks, abdominal wall and neck—are not large ; the instrument is so shaped, with a gradually tapering point, that on entering the tissues it stretches and pushes vessels aside rather than pierces them ; it is always left in the body for some little while, so that any small internal hæmorrhage may have time to stop, and after its withdrawal the fakir compresses the wound for a moment with his fingers and thumb. One further detail is that scar tissue seldom contains large blood-vessels. In spite of all these factors, however, one would expect to see some degree of hæmorrhage when one remembers for how long a tiny cut on one's cheek may bleed when shaving in the morning.

It might be thought possible that some substance which would clot blood quickly was rubbed on the skewers before they entered the tissues, but careful observations have made it certain that no such substance is applied—at any rate during the ceremony itself. In connection with Dr. R. G. Macfarlane's recent work with Russell's viper venom, it seems possible that hæmorrhage might be avoided by applying snake venom to the skewer some hours beforehand and allowing it to dry ; but, as I have already mentioned, the fakirs themselves deny that any such substance is used.

Some of these men may possibly have a rare type of nervous control over their blood-vessels, as has sometimes been described in Europeans ; but I know little about this point beyond what is told us, "that in certain nervous diseases, especially hysteria, the vasomotor reactions of the body are hypersensitive, needles can often be stuck into the tissues without drawing a single drop of blood, and in some cases even the cutting of the radial artery will lead to hardly any hæmorrhage".

The description of the false prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 *Kings*, xviii, 27) is of special interest here in connection with hæmorrhage. It must have been a most extraordinary gathering : four hundred and fifty priests imploring their god, before an enormous crowd, goaded on beyond endurance by Elijah's mocking voice :

"Cry aloud : for he is a god ; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awaked",



and, with these taunts ringing in their ears, working themselves up into such a state of frenzy and excitement that—

"they cried aloud, and cut themselves after their manner with knives and lancets, till the blood gushed out upon them."

The words "after their manner" suggest that self-torture was no new thing to them; and the fact that bleeding is stressed like this at the end of the sentence suggests that it is to this bleeding that attention is being especially directed, as an unusual occurrence only happening when, in a state of more than ordinary excitement and despair, they overstepped the limits of their customary rites. A close parallel to this in the performance of the Rafee fakirs was witnessed by my father during one of their annual ceremonies when Zil Fakhr Shah, unusually worked up and excited during a second demonstration within seventeen hours, was seen to lose about a pint of blood, which he carefully concealed from the crowd around him. In Fig. 20 it can be seen by how little the external jugular vein may escape on some occasions. Sometimes the larynx itself is pierced, and then it is that they spit up blood. Although the Old Testament tells us that Elijah brought all the false prophets of Baal "down to the brook Kishon, and slew them there", many of the sect no doubt escaped, to hand down through the ages their cruel and grisly rites.

The third point of interest, the *absence of suppuration* in the wounds of these fakirs, is really very remarkable. It might perhaps be explained by supposing that continual exposure to infection had given rise to such an accumulation of antibodies in their blood that they were entirely immune to all the ordinary pyogenic organisms present in the air, on their skins, in their mouths and on their instruments. More important factors, both mechanical, must be the polishing of the instruments before the ceremony, and the wiping of them clean as they squeeze through the skin. However, it is rather fun to speculate what some modern surgeons would say if asked to push an instrument like this blindly through the neck; and then what more they would add when told it had been sterilized by licking, and dried on the tail of a shirt!

The fourth point of interest concerns the question of *hypnotism*, and it is difficult to be sure that it does not play some part, if this word is used in its wider sense. This "hypnotism" would, of course, concern not the onlookers but the performer himself. At the nocturnal ceremony in their graveyard, with the continuous drumming of the tom-toms, the degree of religious ecstasy into which these men work themselves is one of the most striking features. Even at the rituals in

the palaces they always have two or three companions muttering prayers behind them, and in some of the photographs I have shown you, the expressions and attitudes of the two old men are certainly very remarkable. In connection with this I have already mentioned that these fakirs are always starving when they perform, not only at their annual ceremony, but at the rituals in the palaces as well, and I believe that a man starving is more susceptible to hypnotism than when he is in a normal condition. It is interesting to remember that King Saul was starving when he visited the Witch of En-dor (1 Sam., xxviii, 7).



FIG. 25.—THE INSTRUMENT IN A FOLD OF SKIN AND NOT IN CONJUNCTIVAL SAC.

(Copyright.)

"Then said Saul unto his servants, Seek me a woman that hath a familiar spirit, that I may go to her, and enquire of her. And his servants said to him, Behold, there is a woman that hath a familiar spirit at En-dor.

"And Saul disguised himself, and put on other raiment, and he went . . .

"Then said the woman, Whom shall I bring up to thee? And he said, Bring me up Samuel . . .

"Then Saul fell straightway all along on the earth, and was sore afraid, because of the words of Samuel: and there was no strength in him; for he had eaten no bread all the day, nor all the night."

Extraordinary things have been done under hypnotic influence; Mesmer himself was able to perform many surgical operations under it just before the introduction of general anaesthetics; and it is an interesting fact noticed by Dr. James Esdaile, well known as a successful surgeon under mesmeric influence in India about sixty-five years ago, that Indians are far more easily hypnotized than are healthy Europeans. I myself know very little about hypnotism, but I think it is unlikely to be concerned in



these rites of the Rafee fakirs mainly because of the unfavourable conditions. Unusual surroundings, bright



FIG. 26.—EYE STILL PROTRUDED AFTER THE INSTRUMENT HAS BEEN REMOVED.  
(Copyright.)

light and the presence of strangers would, I should say, be very unsuitable for the production of any true hypnotic state.

The importance of starvation suggests that perhaps the symptoms of "spontaneous hypoglycæmia" might

throw some light on the mental and sensory states of these fakirs. At the National Hospital, Queen Square, we have recently had a patient under our care suffering from this complaint, a Hebrew whose "epileptic" fits started on a "fast day". If he went without food for more than three hours his blood-sugar fell much below normal, his mental condition became very strange, and afterwards he would remember nothing that occurred while his attack was on. Careful observation, however, before, during and after an attack showed that his pain sensation was normal throughout.

To discover the secret of the fakir who passed the skewer with impunity transversely *through his neck* was an interesting problem. Careful study of this man himself and of cinematograph films of his performances makes it clear that the secret probably lies in what he does with the fingers of his left hand. His right hand is concerned all the time in steadying and directing the instrument, while with the fingers of his left he grasps firmly and pulls forward the important structure in his neck which the skewer must avoid, especially the larynx, œsophagus and the carotid sheath on each side. The prominent veins on his forehead in Fig. 17 testify to this pressure on his jugulars. With all these structures pulled forwards a potential space is left in front of the bodies of his cervical vertebræ, through which the pointed instrument may pass with comparative impunity. On one occasion its course has been confirmed by an X-ray picture taken with it in position.

During the war several cases were recorded of bullets passing right through the neck without causing serious damage. One of these I happened to see in the Surgical Out-Patients' Department at Bart.'s, a man whose neck had been pierced through by a bullet in almost exactly the same direction as that taken by the instruments of the Rafee fakirs, except that the point of exit was a little lower down.

From a medical point of view the *dislocation of the eyeball* is easier to understand, though more disgusting to behold. In the first place the point of the instrument



does not touch the conjunctiva, but is inserted into the loose fold of skin just above the outer canthus. Fig. 25, from a stereoscopic photograph taken by my brother Alan, shows this very well. Young fakirs practise this demonstration at the annual ceremony and may be seen attempting it without success. Little by little the ocular muscles must be stretched, until by the time adult life is reached the eyeball can with ease be dislocated from its socket. A similar but more rapid process is well known to medical men in the case of tumours growing at the back of the orbit, from which the eye may be markedly proptosed while the visual acuity remains quite normal. In animals, too, examples of the same phenomenon occur. A spaniel out with his master shooting was run over by a railway trolley, and was limping about with an eye protruding in a hideous manner. Its injuries were thought to be so serious that its master picked up his gun to end its misery; the cartridge misfired, the dog shook its head, its eye popped back and all was well!

Dislocation of the eye is but seldom seen by travellers now. Even a hundred years ago in Egypt men of the same sect as our Rafee fakirs were only pretending to do it. I should like to quote a short passage from a book by E. W. Lane, 'Modern Egyptians', published at that time. It describes a procession of the Kis'weh he witnessed in Egypt on February 5th, 1834:

" . . . the most remarkable group in this part of the procession consisted of several durwee'shes of the sect of the Rifa'ees, each of whom bore in his hand an iron spike, about a foot in length, with a ball of the same metal at the thick end, having a number of small and short chains attached to it. Several of these durwee'shes, in appearance, thrust the spike with violence into their eyes, and withdrew it, without showing any mark of injury: it seemed to enter to the depth of about an inch."

Two instruments used nowadays by Dervishes in the Sudan merely for tapping their foreheads are in the Pitt-Rivers Museum at Oxford, and they are identical with those used by the Rafee fakirs of Hyderabad city. It is really very extraordinary that in Egypt over

a hundred years ago these men, with the same name and identical instruments, with much pomp and ceremony, should have been doing imperfectly or only pretending to do the very tricks that their cousins are still doing fully in India to-day.

In concluding this brief survey of some of the habits of " Fakirs " in India, there is one point I should like to stress. Oriental races in general, and their religious enthusiasts in particular, have bodies very much like our own. No matter how weird and incomprehensible a demonstration may appear at first sight, careful examination by a competent observer has always revealed a simple explanation, and never so far has need arisen to ascribe to anyone unusual powers or to invoke the supernatural. Lt.-Col. R. H. Elliot, a surgeon in the Indian Medical Service for many years, who made a particular study of unusual demonstrations, and who is now a prominent member of that great association of conjurers " The Magic Circle ", throughout all his life in the East saw nothing at any time to suggest that the laws of Nature were ever broken or suspended. Many a myth, like the great rope trick, " never has been performed and never will be ", and the sooner they " join the fire-breathing dragons and similar inventions of a credulous past the better ".

Physically the bodies of religious fanatics react very much the same as would those of Europeans under similar conditions. It is in their minds that they are different. The qualities of patience, perseverance and acceptance of suffering are developed to a degree quite pathological; and many are content, somewhat selfishly perhaps, to spend every moment of their lives in this world insuring their own souls for comfort in the next.

It would be unfair to end without giving the fakir's reply: " You have your way to God, we have ours. This is ours. If the intention is good all paths lead to God, if only they mount upward. Go your own way and please leave us to follow ours."











